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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the value, the sources, and the components of energizing experiences in college classrooms. Energizing experiences are described as moments of interest and excitement or vitality within the college classroom environment. Data on energizing experiences were gathered from the team teaching experiments by graduate students in educational psychology at the University of Michigan, and through text readings on the subject. The paper is arranged in three sections. The first section, concerned with the value of energy in the classroom, maintains that the energizing experience is an objective in itself, as well as a means to subject matter achievement. Conversely, subject matter may be a means to the energizing experience. Section two cites factors and conditions which create an energy flow within the classroom. The final section focuses on the teacher as the source of classroom energy and on the beliefs, behaviors, skills, and design knowledge conducive to the energizing experience. (KC)

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NOTES ON A STAFF-TEAM APPROACH TO THE PREPARATION OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS AS FACILITATORS OF ENERGIZING EXPERIENCE IN COLLEGE TEACHING

Prepared for AERA Symposium on Preparing Educational Psychologists for College Teaching

April 6, 1977

by Allen Menlo

The University of Michigan

Over the past twelve years at the University of Michigan, I have been involved in team efforts with graduate students in Educational Psychology in an effort to facilitate their and my own learning about what it takes in order to generate moments of high energy, excitement, and vitality within the context of learning in the undergraduate and graduate college classroom experience. Most simply put, the format of this almost semesterly involvement has been as follows. From four to twelve graduate students and I (sometimes plus another faculty member) commit ourselves to the team teaching of a course in the area of Educational Psychology which may draw an enrollment of anywhere from 40 to 100 students. We meet from three to six hours outside of class time, which may, itself, be comprised of two 2 hour sessions or one two hour session per week. At our planning sessions we develop a number of possible designs for the next upcoming class session. Each design is aimed at both facilitating the exploration of identified issues and generating energy within class members. We struggle through the process of deciding on the best design and may even subject ourselves to it as a way of gaining concensual imagery of the design in action and testing it's goodness.

Our designs almost always include some activity for the total class group and some activity for each of the subgroups for which each of us, or part of us, have leadership responsibility. We ascribe responsibilities to various team members for different parts of the design. We take time to examine the rationality and collegiality of our own processes of work and to provide feedback to each other on the impact of our individual behaviors upon our processes of work and upon each other. After a class session in which we have implemented a design, we meet briefly to "clinic" the total session, examining its parts and the detail of our contributions, and considering possible alternative strategies for the session. Most of our designs turn out to be quite energizing for most class members, but some are "bummers." The student evaluations of the course are always above the mean for all courses in the school and often within the upper quarter. The total experience for staff team members is usually very learningful and simultaneously draining and energizing. Graduate students seek out this staff-team experience and earn graduate credit hours but no pay. The experience has strongly influenced graduate team members approaches to their future teaching assignments. There

has also been some contagion to other graduate teaching assistants but little to other faculty.

It has only been within the past few years that staff teams have begun to give serious effort toward the formulation of perspectives about the energizing classroom experience and toward the conduct of brief data collection projects. What now follows are three sections in which there is an attempt to communicate some of the thinking which has developed. Section I states some beliefs which undergird the preparation of college teachers as energy facilitators; Section II presents some theorizing about the generation of energy; and Section III identifies several characteristics and competencies of teachers which appear to promote the conditions for the creation of energy in the college classroom experience.

I. Some of the beliefs which undergird the preparation of college teachers as facilitators of energizing classroom experience, and a staff team approach to this preparation:

A. The experience of being energized in the context of the college classroom, whether that experience positively influences subject matter achievement or not, is a legitimate and favored objective in and of itself.

B. Learning tasks and the movement toward subject matter objectives are means for the experience of energy, as well as the experience of energy possibly being a means for the accomplishment of learning tasks and the movement toward the achievement of subject matter objectives.

C. The college teacher is a major source of direct and indirect influence on the extent to which conditions for energizing class members exist within the classroom.

D. There are sets of beliefs, behaviors, awarenesses, skills, and design knowledge which future college teachers can learn through an intensive, collaborative apprenticeship experience in teaching and these can enhance their competency in facilitating the existence of conditions for the energizing experience within college classrooms.

II. Some theorizing about the generation of energy within class members:

The content of this theorizing emerges from both interviews with college students about their own moments of feeling energized in classrooms and an exploration of literature on energy, activeness, involvement, and participation within the college and adult teaching-learning situations. The current state of the theorizing is that there is an array of interdependent factors or conditions which, as they are experienced, determine the extent of energy or vitality that arises within the class member. The factors or conditions which have been identified thus far follow below.

A. Conditions related to engagement in the learning task.

1. Dilemma. For this condition to be activated, the class member feels in the midst of choice between alternatives, each of which has consequenses that affect the member in some personal way. The alternatives may surface unresolved value conflicts, raise value resolutions from a state of complacency to a state of reconsideration and tension, rotate an issue to a previously unconsidered perspective, re-open a solved or laid-aside problem by a redefinition of it or an introduction of new data.

2. Self-disclosure. This condition "happens" for a class member when the member unveils, makes manifest, shows, or opens to the view of others selected or unselected aspects of the member's self. The immediately foregoing use of "member's self" defines the self as an object in the possession of the member which if revealed, can become observable to the member and to others. The disclosure of self to others may occur through a variety of direct and indirect means and may result in feelings of exposure, contact, or vulnerability. Disclosure by one member has the

potential of stimulating further disclosures by others. As well as self-disclosing to others, a member may experience internal self-disclosure as some act or thought reveals a new aspect of self to the member or allows the gaining of a new perspective on some previously revealed aspects of self. In a sense, one's internal self-disclosure or disclosure of self to others provides a heightened moment of confirmation of one's existence.

3. Risk. For this condition to be acutalized, the class member, must take an action in the public setting of the classroom -- an action which the member perceives as having potential threat to the maintenance of self and social esteem. Actions which have no threat potential for the member, are not viewed here as risk. Self-disclosure as described above can be a risk-taking act, depending on the nature of both the disclosure and the recipients ofthe disclosure.

4. Feedback. This condition comes into existence when a class member receives information about the member's thinking, feeling, or behaving from others in the classroom through either direct or indirect, casual or purposely planned procedures. The information may be confirming or disconfirming of prior beliefs, and pleasing or unpleasing to receive. The reception of a feedback message as it was fully intended by the giver often involves a face-to-face contact between giver and receiver.

B. Conditions related to the socio-emotional environment with the classroom.

1. Expectation of vital experience. This is the expectation that the activity will be relevant and important to the participant -- that is, the participant is perceiving the situation as crucial to his intellectual or affective development. In this sense, the activity is perceived as having face validity. Thus, there is an expectation or a set on the part of the class members that both the process and the resultant outcomes of the activity are near-indispensable toward the meeting of their needs. One class member recently brought this phenomenon into bold relief by saying, "At this moment I have a trembling awareness that I'm about to disconfirm a belief which I've always held to be true."

2. Uncertainty of outcome. The class member is unsure of what the outcome of the situation will be and cannot anticipate or predict the end result. It will come as a surprise or discovery.

This element, as well as the expectation of vital experience, was illustrated recently in a class session designed to demonstrate the use of the leaderless group discussion procedure as a means for selecting supervisory personnel. Five class members volunteered to participate in the leaderless discussion, while the remainder took the roles of assessors of supervisory traits of the discussion participants. Although the participants had a discussion topic and the assessors were provided general dimensions for observation, no one knew precisely what would occur or what the outcomes would be. At the conclusion of the session, both the leaderless discussion participants and the trait assessors spontaneously expressed the feeling that they were "sitting on the edge of their chairs caught up in the experience, and not knowing what was going to happen next."

3. Optimism about the outcome. Although the class member is uncertain as to outcome, the member does feel the end result will be valuable. Although anxiety and uncertainty may be evoked bacause of the activity and the possible outcomes which could occur, the member believes that the outcome will have benefits.

4. Sense of direction. It is important that the class members perceive a sense of direction. The members view the activity as one that does not have specified objectives, but has sufficient purpose and goal imagery to provide direction. There is a means and end to the activity. Even though the end is unclear, it is perceived by the members as one that will provide an opportunity for each to satisfy needs and meet general expectations. In a recent classroom experience, this sense of direction was verbalized when a member said, "I'm not exactly certain where this discussion will take us, but I have the strong feeling that we are moving in the right direction."

5. Reward from experiencing the experience. This condition exists for the class member when the major source of positive feeling extracted from a learning experience is the pleasure or excitement of being within it. Thus, the content studied, methods employed, achievement of objectives, persons present, or gifts bestowed are not cited separately as the sourses of reward. Instead, the sense of being in touch with a stream of vital, undifferentiated experience is identified as the major positiveness and source of motivation for a similar future experience. It is possible for persons to move through a learning experience and yet not consciously experience the experience they moved through. An example which comes to mind is a recent episode in which class members were struggling to sharpen their listening skills through tedious practice and feedback from each other. Some members emerged from that activity with positive feeling about their end achievements but negativeness about the exhausting experience.

   Others cited with equal positiveness the skills acquired and an excitement of being participants in and witness to the array of actions as they unfolded. Many persons are deprived of this source of reward. For class members to know and use this source of reward apparently necessitates the elimination or reduction of the usual rewards in classroom learning and the freeing of students from both concerns about specified achievement and editing their behaviors and thoughts.

6. Legitimacy of ignorance. The participant feels that being unfamiliar with the content or material is an acceptable situation. This feeling is not limited to the class member-instructor relationship; it also includes the relationships between members. In other words, it is okay to be unacquainted with the information being discussed and, further, it is acceptable to display one's ignorance. Hence, ignorance is not depreciated and the class member ss not punished by others within the classroom. Further, the possession of ignorance on an issue may even be viewed as a state of being that allows the possessor to have a perspective of the issue which is unique, and of special resource to the class. This condition is manifested when, in the midst of a sophisticated discussion of a complex theoretical construct, a less-informed class member raises a profoundly simple question, which suddenly calls everyone's attention to the central, basic issue and brings a shared clarity to the exploration.

7. Commitment to the best. This refers to the class member's commitment to the importance of each person receiving maximum benefit. In this respect, the commitment is not limited to a concern and desire for the maximum benefit for just one's self. Rather, the member is concerned about the best for others involved in the activity as well and experiences participation as something will prove to be beneficial for all who are present. As a consequence, the member senses attitudes and behaviors among fellow participants that they too are interested in the best for the member. There is no vindictiveness or bitterness evidenced by the members as they interact with each other.

8. Valuing the person. When a class member feels accepted apart from skills or status and senses the genuine interest of others in him/her as a human entity, then the member is very likely experiencing the condition of his person being valued for its own sake. Immediately following an energizing experience, class members have turned to their peers and experssed deep appreciation for allowing them to be precisely what they are, peculiarities and all. A relationship seems to exist between the class members that suggests that each is perceived and appreciated as an inherently worthy individual regardless of qualifications. There is, at least for moments in time, an unconditional positive regard for each other.

9. Respect for competency in role. Closely related to the sense of freedom derived from being one's self is the feeling of liberation produced by being respected and accepted as a competent class member, student, or learner. In this case there is little need for the member to self-justity being present. Neither instructor nor fellow class members challenge the individual's admission, appearance, or participation in the class. In this respect, the individual member is not asked to present credentials in order to validage participatoin, and to some degree certain qualities of expertness are ascribed to each member. Members experience equality in their role relationships with each other.

10. Awareness of the presence of others. Class members have described a sense of self-arousal by their sudden realization of being in the midst of either a clear or hazy surrounding of other persons. Sometimes this has been described as an experience of pressure to act, other times as an excitement over the possibility of experiencing a percious moment of multiple human contact, and still other times as a sea of immediate resources for intelelctual and emotional support and stimulation. The experiencing of this condition is theopposite of feeling isolated, psychologically distant, or having an impression of a mutually limited view between self and other. Some class members have described this as an illusion of overlappingness with others.

III Teacher beliefs, behaviors, skills, and design knowledge; all viewed as being promotive of conditions for the energizing classroom experience:

A. Beliefs

1) that the basic, core, or root purpose for which persons enter and engage in relationships with others is to confirm their own existence and to validate the goodness of their contribution during it. The perceptual consequence of this belief is that of viewing all efforts of the student as the student's best-of-the-moment attempt to generate evidence toward a presence rather than an absence of being and a positiveness rather than negativeness of social value during that presence.

2) that persons do not resist action or change; they seek it as part of their inherent nature. What persons do resist are expected consequences which will diminish their self or social esteem. The behavioral consequence of this belief for the teacher is that of being assertive at promoting, simultaneously, an activeness of the student and a realization by the student of the student's own power to decide whether or not and how to act.

B. Behaviors

1) supportively invitational. These take the form of verbal and non-verbal manifestations which carry content and message character that reach out and warmly solicit the student's involvement. They increase the likelihood of approach and decrease the likelihood of avoidance.

2) nonintrusively encouraging. These, again, are verbal and non-verbal communications which beckon the student toward participation and, almost at the same time, allow for, clarify options of, and unconditionally respect the student's decision to take part or not. They increase the likelihood of class members not being overly-threatened by the potential consequences of their own participation.

3) authentically self-sharing. This means that the teacher is not acting a self or is not engaging in a conscious effort to present a self, but, instead, has entered into a stream of collaborative adventure and exploration with class members. This does not mean that the teacher is fully disclosing of all thoughts and feelings at all moments. It is intended to mean that the teacher has enough comfort with the state of his presence--whatever it may be--that he doesn't feel the need to manipulate its nature to fit the expectations he perceives members having of him.

4) non-defensively vital. This classification includes behaviors which demonstrate a personal comfort with uncertainty and conflict, ongoing commitment to explore unturned issues, and a perseverance to pursue the task to the "bitter end."

C. Awarenesses

1) consciousness of the existence of communication nuances. This refers to the possession of a knowledge and imagery of the partial and indirect expressions of thought, feeling, and behavior which carry some type of intent or meaning by the sender of the expression. These messages and meta-messages are usually outside the conception of reality of most persons and pass as non-phenomena in the interactions between class members.

2) consciousness of the impact of proxemic factors on thought, feeling, and behavior. This refers to a knowledge and imagery of the function of space and position in human interaction, and an awareness that the immediate environment is a source of message and meta-message to persons who exist within it.

D. Skills

1) stating clear and logically limited requests for participation. When this occurs, the class member has concrete imagery of the task at hand and does not experience instruction overload.

2) non-distortive, reflective listening. When the teacher can lay out, in bold relief, at a moment in time, for all to consensually hear, a member's presence and the feedback of that experience of presence upon the member can serve to affirm the member's perception of his existence and its importance in the group.

3) interpersonal and situational scanning acuity. This heightened awareness of mainly non-verbal cues allows the teacher to surface aspirations, needs, perspectives, feelings, and puzzlements which are withholdingly seeking expression.

4) setting spatial, positional, and artifactual arrangements which reduce ecological constraints to interaction and communication. This takes the form of either managing or facilitating the deployment of chairs, tables, equipment, and materials and the levels of sound within the immediate scene of experience.

5) facilitating the focused gathering of learnings. Motivation to continue involvement has some dependence upon the extraction of time-to-time insights from situationally developmental interactions. This also would appear to contribute to members' optimism about eventual outcome of experience and provide a sense of constructive movement.

E. Instructional Design Knowledge

Learning tasks are most likely to be energizing if they are cast within a design which promotes the facing of dilemmas, the taking of risks, the receiving of feedback, and the disclosure of personally meaningful information by class members. A wide variety of such designs for participative classroom learning of concepts, skills, and attitudes in the social and communication sciences have been published and are available to interested teachers. The building of a repertoire of such designs and the acquisition of knowledge about the procedure for creating new designs allows the teacher to use already-existing designs, modify already-existing designs, or create new designs for particular classroom learning situations.

All of the conditions theorized as being prerequisite to the creation of the energizing experience(as described in Section II), and all of the teacher competencies viewed as being promotive of these conditions (as described in Section III) are foci of collaborative exploration and individual learning for staff-team members as they work in the context of a live teaching situation. In addition to the "data" derived from the dynamics of their experiences in the classroom and in their planning sessions, and the information gathered from text readings on the theory and practice of designing for participative learning in the classroom, staff-team members design brief action-research projects and conduct these through quantitative and qualitative data collection -- with class members and their interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions as data sources. The learnings from these formal and informal inquiries serve to enrich each staff-team member's knowledge about the process of energizing as well being fed back into the process of planning for future class sessions. Some of the questions which have served as targets for action-research projects are: What moments of member interaction function as stimuli for energy? What fragments of learning tasks function as stimuli for energy? How do conditions interact in order to impact on the beginning and ending of energy? What are the experienced internal locations of energy within the person? Does gender influence the nature of energy experiences?